

The background of the entire page is a close-up, slightly blurred image of the American flag, showing the red and white stripes and the blue field with white stars.

ILLINOIS VETERANS ADVISORY COUNCIL FY2021

ANNUAL REPORT



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DIRECTOR LETTER



The Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs is proud to present the Fiscal Year 2021 Illinois Veterans Advisory Council Annual Report. At the beginning of the 2018 Fiscal Year, the Discharged Servicemembers Task Force was sunset with the Annual Reporting then being tasked to the Illinois Veterans Advisory Council.

To better serve our veterans, key initiatives have been discussed and acted upon throughout the quarterly meetings that were held. The appointed members of the council have dedicated many hours and resources to ensure the most relevant and timely issues facing veterans have been explored and addressed.

The Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs, in conjunction with the Illinois Veterans Advisory Council, works diligently to assist servicemembers and their families who return to civilian life after their dedicated service in the United States military.

Terry Prince

Acting Director





HISTORY OF THE ILLINOIS VETERANS ADVISORY COUNCIL

Pursuant to Public Act 100-10, effective June 30, 2017, the State of Illinois created the Illinois Veterans Advisory Council (IVAC). The mission of IVAC is to investigate the re-entry process for service members who return to civilian life after being engaged in an active theatre. The investigation shall include the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder, homelessness, disabilities, and other issues the council finds relevant to the re-entry process. To accomplish the mission IVAC has convened teams of experienced, professional veteran advocates, and community leaders to analyze major issue areas and develop strategic policy recommendations. IVAC's strategic policy recommendations are published annually in the IVAC Annual Report. In accordance with the Act, IVAC members include:

- Four members of the General Assembly appointed one each by the President of the Senate, the Minority Leader of the Senate, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and the Minority Leader of the House of Representatives
- Six veterans appointed by the Director of Veterans' Affairs
- One veteran appointed by the commander or president of each veterans service organization that is chartered by the federal government and by the State of Illinois and elects to appoint a member
- One person appointed by the Adjutant General of the Illinois National Guard
- One person appointed by the Illinois Attorney General
- One person appointed by the Illinois Secretary of State
- One person appointed by the Director of the Illinois Department of Employment Security
- One person appointed by each military family organization that is chartered by the federal government



ILLINOIS VETERANS' ADVISORY COUNCIL (FY 2021)

Michael Peck, *Chairman, Military Order of the World Wars*

Dr. Jerry Field, *Vice Chairman, Jewish War Veterans*

GENERAL ASSEMBLY MEMBERS

The Honorable Sue Rezin, *Illinois State Senator*

The Honorable Dan Swanson, *Illinois State Representative*

The Honorable Lance Yednock, *Illinois State Representative*

EXTERNAL AGENCY APPOINTEES

Brig. General Richard Neely, *Illinois National Guard*

Thomas Banning, *Office of the Attorney General*

Gregory J. Curran, *Office of the Secretary of State*

Jorge Eric Bermudez, *IL Department of Employment Security*

DIRECTOR'S APPOINTEES

Bill Wolff, *Veteran Advocate*

Quinn Triplett, *Veteran Advocate*

Anthony Ortiz, *Veteran Advocate*

Megan Everett, *Veteran Advocate*

VETERAN SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

Al Reynolds, *Disabled American Veterans*

Myron Kirby, *American Legion*

Stanley Olenjack, *Marine Corps League*

Keith Witherell, *AMVETS*

Peggy Arick, *Blue Star Mothers of America*

Pat Noel, *Catholic War Veterans*

Joe Schaler, *Military Order of the Purple Heart*

Louis Meyers, *Reserve Officers' Association*

John Murray, *Veterans Assistance Commission*

Vince Long, *Veterans of Foreign Wars*

Roy L. Dolgos, *Vietnam Veterans' of America*

Bob Tyler, *Military Officers Association of America*

Crystal Womack, *Illinois Veterans' Advisory Council, Secretary*

RECOMMENDED VETERAN LEGISLATION 117TH CONGRESS

The council recommends to the Illinois Congressional delegation legislation that will support and assist the veteran and his family.

VA Mental Health and Suicide Prevention – Ensure that VA remains fully funded and will not outsource their mental health services for PTSD. The VA must remain peer friendly.

Comprehensive Caregiver Support – in recognition of the significant role that family caregivers play in providing personal care services and supports to veterans severely injured in the line of duty after September 11, 2001.

Expand and Strengthen Service member transition – 250,000 service members leave service every year and need transition assistance.

Improve Survivor Benefit – DIC is significantly lower than an equivalent provided to federal civilian employees who are killed while serving in the line of duty.

Transition Improvement Act 2019 – Passed by House on May 22, 2019. Bill would reopen TAP (Transition Assistance Program) in the community programs for veterans.

Dental Care for Military Veterans – urge that legislation be enacted to provide dental care to all enrolled service-connected disabled veterans.

Reinstate the 48-hour review that allows VSO's to re review claim decisions prior to their posting.

Reform the Presumptive Process to Support Veterans Claiming Service-Connected Disabilities for Toxic Exposures. When deploying to defend our nation, we pursue cutting edge weapons, tactics, techniques, and procedures to defeat our enemies. The consequences for servicemembers become apparent later, sometimes decades later. When Agent Orange, burn pits, and other sources of hazardous materials cause illnesses, the current practice is to place the burden of proof and record-keeping on veterans. Many are unable to prove their exposure. While research is done, ill veterans suffer without health care benefits. If veterans pass away early, their widows will not receive the Dependency and Indemnity Compensation.

Achieve Equity of Benefits, Protections and Administrative Support for Guard/Reserve Members Consistent with Their Active-Duty Counterparts. Guard and Reserve troops can be activated with little notice. The COVID-19 pandemic response highlights because we need to ensure servicemembers are always ready. Along with this, the transition to the “total force” concept has transformed the National Guard and Reserve troops into an operational force that is an essential part of America's national defense strategy. However, despite conducting the same duties as their active-duty counterparts at increasing frequencies, the reserve component is not receiving the same support.

Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery – The council has reviewed the situation at Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery. We recommend that the Illinois Congressional delegation meet with the VA National Cemetery Director and implement a plan to reroute truck traffic onto Arsenal Road to ensure that trucks do not enter the cemetery. The council further urges that a plan is developed that will ensure that the construction and placement of a bridge does not interfere with the dignity and solemnity of the national cemetery.



RECOMMENDED LEGISLATION FOR THE 102ND ILLINOIS GENERAL ASSEMBLY ILLINOIS HOUSE

HB3590 – OPPOSE. This bill would defund the VAC of Cook County and eliminate essential services provided by the VAC. The Illinois Military Veteran Assistance Act specifically grants assistance to veterans that is not provided by the Federal or State Veterans Affairs. The VAC is managed by veterans for veterans.

HB359 – Amendment 1 provides for an office of inspector general at the Department of Veterans Affairs. The amendment is in response to the issues created by COVID 19 at the State Veterans Homes.

HB2378/SB2559 – Amendment to the Standard Homestead Exemption for Disabled Veterans. This bill will allow Surviving Spouses to receive the exemption when qualified for DIC.

HB583 – Creates an income tax credit for taxpayers who are caregivers of a veteran with disability.

HB35 – Veterans Bill of Rights. (1) Increase loans to small business owned and controlled by veterans; (2) increase veterans' access to health care; (3) take specific steps to preventing suicide; (4) develop and implement strategy to end veteran homelessness within 3 years.

HB163 – Provides that at time of enrollment, a dependent of U.S. military personnel housed in temporary housing located outside of school district but will live within district in 6 months must be enrolled in district without charged tuition.

HB 390 – Appropriates \$200,000 to be used for costs associated with service dog training for veterans.

HB2775 – Homelessness Prevention. Bill would ensure that assistance provided by the VACs would not be hindered by a landlord. Passage of this bill would help meet program provided in HB35.

HB3279 – program for the Department of Veterans Affairs to provide certified nursing assistants to meet requirements for practical nursing license.

ILLINOIS SENATE

SB59 – Provides that the Department of Professional Regulations shall waive all application fees and examination fees for active military personnel and their spouses.

SB91 – provides admission to state veterans homes for Guard/Reserve Military Retirees. Currently they are eligible only for the domiciliary.

SB569 – Provides that high school students can take the Armed Service Vocational Aptitude Test and consult with recruiter on school grounds.

RESPONSE TO COVID-19

We will continue to assess programs relative to our priorities and ensure a credible accounting of the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has on servicemembers, families, survivors, and the government entities on which we rely to effect legislation related to these people and their concerns.

Due to the COVID 19 pandemic the council was unable to meet in person and alternative communication channels were set up to communicate with members. All council members were provided direction to join the Illinois Veterans Advisory Council meetings via WebEx for the fiscal year along with emails to provide direction.

To ensure that we perform our duties the council needs access to the VA and IDPH inspection reports of each home. Council members urge passage of HB 359 to create an office of inspector general for the IDVA.

We also urge that membership on the council be extended to VA VISN 12. Their expertise will enhance the council and help to ensure immediate access to VA when needed.

The council also recommends that minutes from each home advisory council meeting be provided to the council.

The council urges that the annual report from each VAC be provided and best practices be included in the Councils Annual Report.

MENTAL HEALTH AND SUICIDE PREVENTION

We urge the VA not to outsource the solution to PTSD care. The VA must replicate the peer, community and institutional support veterans had while they were in the military. The VA can provide veterans with a feeling of connection to other people, give veterans a reason for living or a sense of purpose.

We urge that all veteran service officers and their staff be trained in suicide prevention. Clinical trial research has shown the training to be highly effective in eliminating suicidal ideation.

WOMEN VETERANS

Today, women are serving in greater numbers in the U.S. military and make up to 20 percent of new recruits, 15.9 percent of the 1.3 million personnel serving on active duty and 19.3 percent of the National Guard and reserve forces.

A recent survey has reported that VA employees continue to confuse women veterans as spouses and caregivers or challenge their veteran status. This is unacceptable and all those who serve veterans must be trained to treat them with respect.

Women veterans with children who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless face exceedingly difficult barriers from single veterans without children. It is recommended that housing agencies receiving grants be required to set aside funding for women veterans with children.



TRANSITIONING VETERANS

The period of moving from active duty to civilian life can be challenging. Over 250,000 service members leave the military every year. To assist veterans with reintegration into their communities it is important for them to have access to transition resources that apply to their local communities. We urge that the TAP (Transition Assistance Program) in cooperation with Department of Labor and Small Business Administration be reopened in the community programs for veterans.

We urge the ILNG Leadership to incorporate TAP for National Guard members leaving their military service to better understand available VA services.

HOMELESS VETERANS

On any given day there are over a thousand homeless veterans in the state of Illinois. Most homeless veterans suffer from substance abuse, poverty, lack of support networks, and dismal living conditions in overcrowded or substandard housing. Veterans often suffer residual effects from their service that prevent them to properly integrate to society. As a result, many turn to substance abuse to mitigate their suffering. Prioritizing services, such as job retention, job placement, substance abuse counseling, support groups, proper housing, and transition services should be a legislative priority for 2021.

INCARCERATED VETERANS

Veterans can sometimes run into issues with law enforcement and the criminal justice system resulting in incarceration. Despite circumstances, many veterans may be eligible for VA Benefits, the amount depends on the type of benefit and reason for incarceration.

VA disability compensation payments are reduced if a veteran is convicted of a felony and imprisoned for more than 60 days. Once released from prison, compensation may be reinstated based upon the severity of the service-connected disability.

The Health Care for Re-entry program is designed to help the incarcerated veteran successfully reintegrate back into the community upon released. The Advisory Council strongly urges the IDVA to assign a VSO to each state prison to assist veterans with re instatement of benefits and reentry into the community.

VETERANS UNEMPLOYMENT

Veterans are currently two times more likely to be unemployed than pre-covid. As such, IVAC will promote and ensure that veteran-specific employment components are included in any stimulus plans, especially any new Covid, environmental, and social policies.

CONCLUSION

The council has made every effort to make this report inclusive, however we note that our efforts must be specific and direct to accomplish our legislative goals. We have worked for three years to pass an amendment to the standard homestead exemption for disabled veterans that would include the surviving spouses who receive from the VA the Dependent Indemnity Compensation. This bill is needed as our population is aging and out living their savings. The spouses are part of the team that made up our greatest generation.

We also note that we have a new generation of great Americans and that is the service members who have fought our nation's longest war in Afghanistan and Iran the issues with the burn pits must be addressed and we need to direct our efforts to assist these veterans.

We ask the Governor, his directors, and the general assembly to please make every effort to pass the needed legislation requested and to urge our Congressional Delegation to pass the needed federal legislation.

Our citizens enjoy great freedom, and we owe a debt of gratitude to those who make these freedoms possible, and as Lincoln stated, "to care for the widows and orphans."

